

ETHICS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
A Resource Manual

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ETHICS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A Resource Manual

Much has been written about domestic violence. Much more needs to be written. And of the information which has been written, much needs to be understood, believed, taken to heart and acted upon. Most information concerning domestic violence is written from the heterosexual point of view. However, power and control are issues in the homosexual world as well, and theories and practices can be equally applied.

It is intriguing and challenging to approach the issue of domestic violence from an ethical framework. This cannot be done, of course, without some basic knowledge concerning domestic violence. Thus, this paper will provide general information, and then a section concerning ethical considerations will follow.

General Information

Domestic or family violence encompasses many things. It is spousal/partner abuse. It is child abuse, elder abuse, and toleration of violence between or among siblings. It also comes in many forms. Some are quite obvious -- physical abuse such as hitting, biting, slapping, spanking, etc.; and sexual abuse, which ranges from inappropriate touching to unwanted sexual intercourse. But there are many less obvious forms of abuse, some so subtle that the victim may not recognize them, nor do those around her. These include blaming, threatening, manipulating, humiliating and depriving (Brinegar 1992). In addition to the above, there may be destruction/harm to property or pets. As if all of these were not enough, the sociocultural environment often re-victimizes the victim.

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What all of the above have in common is the issue of POWER AND CONTROL. In every scenario, there is an individual or group of individuals who seek to have power and control over someone else or over some other group. A husband beats his wife because dinner is not done to his satisfaction. A mother spansks her child because she spilled a glass of milk. A boyfriend drowns his live-in lover's kitten because he found cat hair on his jacket, and he really doesn't want his lover to have the cat anyway. A daughter degrades her elderly mother in the grocery store because she is slow in making a decision. While this paper focuses on domestic/family violence (generally partner to partner), it is important to understand that the dynamics of power, control and anger are similar in all abusive situations.

It is also important to note that most of the literature concerning domestic violence speaks to the victim as being female. Over 95% of all battering is perpetrated by males against females. But power and control issues really know no gender boundaries, and it is important to recognize that males can be victimized as well as females. Thus, when literature (or this paper) refer to female victims, it should be implied that men can be victims as well.

The Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project identifies many myths concerning battering. They include the following:

- (1) Battering only affects a small percentage of the population. (*Two - four billion women of all races and classes re beaten every year.*)
- (2) Battering is only momentary loss of control. (*Battering can go on for hours.*)
- (3) Battered women like to be beaten. (*No one likes to be abused, but women often stay because they have no other options or they hope their partner will change or the children need their father -- not because they like it.*)
- (4) Battering does not produce serious injuries. (*50% of all women's injuries*

- seen in a hospital emergency room have been caused by battering. 21% of all women using emergency surgical services are battered.)
- (5) Alcohol and other drug abuse causes men to batter. (*Men batter when they are sober as well as when they are drunk. This excuse allows them to escape the responsibility for the abuse.*)
 - (5) Women need to be beaten to keep them in line; they deserve it. (*Women are not the property of men -- no one is someone else's property. No one has the right to control another's behavior or body through violence and abuse.*)
 - (6) Religion or faith will prevent a person from battering. (*Even clergymen have abused their wives.*)
 - (7) Even if he is violent, it is better for the children to have a father. (*Children are very upset and scared by violence. It is better for them to be without a father than to be frightened of their father.*)
 - (8) Domestic violence occurs more in certain ethnic cultures and more in lower income families than in others. (*Victims come from all cultures, races, occupations, income levels and ages. For example, the number of wife abuse cases reported in a working-class, African American neighborhood in New York was roughly the same as the number reported in a white, upper-middle class area in Connecticut with approximately the same number in population.*)
 - (9) Therapy or counseling will stop the violence. (*The best way for the violence to stop is to separate the parties involved, at least for a short period of time. Unless the abuser takes responsibility for his violence and says that the violence is his fault and stays in professional counseling in order to stop the violence, he will probably continue to be violent. Batterers programs are the best place for offenders. **Never attempt to counsel a couple who are in a battering relationship. It increases the danger for the victim, and increases the likelihood that the violence will escalate!***)
 - (10) A person is safe from battering at least while she is pregnant. (*Battering often starts when a women is pregnant. 42% of women in shelters have been battered while pregnant. Many birth defects are caused by this violence.*)

Thus, the first step toward understanding domestic violence is to confront the myths.

Perhaps one of the most telling pieces of evidence concerning how ingrained these myths are--among women as well as men--is this: When confronted with a situation of domestic abuse, we almost always ask "Why doesn't she just leave him?" We rarely ask, "Why does he beat her?" It is important to answer these questions, and is important to begin

with the second question about why batterers abuse their partners.

The second step toward increasing awareness of domestic violence is to develop an understanding of how to identify potential victims and potential abusers. The Reverend S. Amelia Stinson-Wesley (1993) offers the following list of clues to help identify battered women:

Physical: appearance of frequent, unexplained bruises or illness; heavy application of make up or a sudden change to hide bruises; wearing of unusually heavy clothing out of season to hide bruises/injuries; excuses or hard to believe explanations for injuries or hospital visits; unusual affect; frequent trips to hospital emergency departments.

Relationships: isolated; has no or few friends; may be estranged from relatives.

Attendance and Participation in Church: erratic--wants to come but cannot and makes excuses; does not join activities; changes in attendance patterns; won't stay around to talk to anyone after church because she must hurry home.

Children: isolated, with few friends; too much or too little discipline; unusual affect, particularly sad, fearful or defiant; children do not listen to their mother; children may want to participate but are not allowed to do so.

Other: seems jittery, on edge, withdrawn or has frequent mood swings; asks you not to come visit and/or turns down requests by you; uneasy feelings/intuitions you might have; attitudes and roles in the family life are rigid, often traditional; willingness and desire to help out but frequently unable to be consistent in following through.

Although it is often difficult to believe, many women do not even recognize that they are victims of battering. This can be particularly true if the woman grew up in a home in

which female family members and her mother were abused. She may consider this to be normal behavior--just something that every woman has to deal with. Also, it is likely that while a woman may be able to identify being hit or slapped as abuse, she often will not recognize the more subtle forms of abuse. According to Rev. Stinson-Wesley, emotional battering may include the following: calling her names, putting her down, telling her no one else will want her if she leaves him, treating her like a child, isolating her from friends and family, withholding affection, threatening her with harm, or threatening that he will commit suicide if she leaves.

Because our culture defines sexual intercourse as a "woman's duty," a battered woman may not recognize the sexual aspect of her abuse. She may not know that forced sex (rape) is not appropriate, even while married. A partner may not recognize the following as acts of violence: calling the partner names (sexual); making jokes about his/her body; criticizing him/her as a lover; making him/her do sexual things that he/she does not want to do; tortures the partner in connection with sex; engaging in affairs with others and then bragging or gloating about it; and comparing his/her love-making to that of others.

It is as important to be able to identify potential batterers as it is to be able to identify their victims. Not only is it important for those in helping professions and in other potential intervention situations, but it is important for all of us to recognize the red flags which often surface very early in a relationship. Again, it is important to note that these characteristics can be seen in men as well as women, in homosexual relationships as well as heterosexual ones. (Later, I will discuss some problems unique to dealing with

homosexual relationships in which battering takes place.) The Project for Victims of Family Violence in Fayetteville, Arkansas has developed a list of signs about which to be aware. The more symptoms present, the greater the likelihood that violence will take place. If three or more are present, the risk of violence is significant.

SIGNS OF A BATTERING PERSONALITY

- (1) Jealousy: At the beginning of a relationship, an abuser will always say that jealousy is a sign of love; jealousy has nothing to do with love, it is a sign of possessiveness and lack of trust. He/she will question the woman about who she talks to, accuse her of flirting, or be jealous of time spent with her family, friends or children. As the jealousy progresses, he/she may call more frequently during the day or may stop by unannounced. He/she may not want her to go to work for fear she'll meet someone else, or even do strange things such as checking her car mileage or asking friends to watch her.
- (2) Controlling Behavior: At first, the batterer will say this behavior is because he/she is concerned for the woman's safety, her need to use her time well or her need to make good decisions. He/she will be angry if the woman is "late" and will question her closely about where she went and who she talked to. As the behavior worsens, he/she may not let the woman make personal decisions about the house, her clothing, going to church. He/she may keep all the money or even make her ask permission to leave the house or the room.
- (3) Quick Involvement: Many battered women dated or knew their abuser for less than six months before they were married, engaged or living together. He/she comes on like a whirlwind, and may pressure her to commit to the relationship in such a way that later the woman will feel guilty if she wants to slow down or leave the relationship.
- (4) Unrealistic Expectations: Abusive people will expect their partner to meet all their needs; he/she expects the partner to be the perfect partner, lover, friend, parent, etc. He/she will say things like, "If you love me, I'm all you need--you're all I need." She is supposed to take care of everything for him/her emotionally and in the house.
- (5) Isolation: The abusive person tries to cut the person off from all resources. If she has men friends, she is a "whore." If she has female friends, she is either a lesbian, or if she really is a lesbian, her partner accuses her of being unfaithful. The batterer considers his/her partner's supporters to be trouble makers. He/she may want to live in the country without a telephone, or may not let the partner have access to a car, or may try to keep the partner from working or going to school.

(6) Blames Other For Problems: If he/she is chronically unemployed, someone is always doing him/her wrong or is out to get him/her. He/she may make mistakes and then blame the partner for causing upset which led to loss of concentration on the work. Everything that goes wrong is the partner's fault.

(7) Blames Others For Feelings: He/she will tell the partner, "You make me mad," or "You're hurting me by not doing what I want you to do," or "I can't help being angry." He/she makes the decisions about what he/she thinks or feels, but will use feelings to manipulate the partner.

(8) Hypersensitivity: An abuser is easily insulted, and often sees anything negative as a personal attack.

(9) Cruelty to Animals or Children: This is a person who punishes animals brutally or is insensitive to their pain or suffering. He/she may expect children to be capable of doing things which are beyond their ability (such as spanking a two year old for wetting her diaper), or will tease children until they cry. Sixty percent of the men who beat the women they are with also beat their children. He/she may treat children in a subservient way, such as not allowing them to eat at the dinner table.

(10) "Playful" Use of Force in Sex: This kind of person may like to throw the partner down and hold him/her down during sex, or may want to act out fantasies during sex where the partner is helpless. He/she may show very little concern about whether or not the partner wants to have sex, but will sulk or get angry to manipulate the partner into compliance. He/she may start having sex with the partner while the partner is sleeping, or demands sex when the partner is ill or tired.

(11) Verbal Abuse: In addition to saying things which are meant to be hurtful and cruel, this can be seen when the abuser degrades the partner, curses the partner or minimizes the partner's accomplishments. The abuser will tell the partner that the partner is stupid and unable to function without him/her.

(12) Rigid Sex Roles. In heterosexual partnerships, the abuser expects a woman to serve him, and may insist that she stay at home, obey him, etc. Women are seen as inferior to men. Rigid sex roles can be seen in homosexual relationships as well. We, too, are a product of our stereotyped environment. Some lesbians feel a great deal of animosity toward "feminine" women.

(13) Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: Many partners are confused about their abuser's "sudden" changes--they make think that their abuser has some sort of special mental problem because one minute the abuser is nice and the next the abuser is exploding. Explosiveness and moodiness are typical of people who beat their partners, and these behaviors are related to other characteristics like hypersensitivity.

**** (14) Past Battering:** This person may say that he/she has hit others in the past, but that they made him/her do it. The victim may hear from other partners or relatives that the person is abusive. A batterer will beat any partner he/she is with if the partner is with him/her long enough; situational circumstances do not make a person an abusive personality.

**** (15) Threats of Violence:** This could include any threat of physical force meant to control the partner: "I'll slap your mouth off." "I'll kill you." "I'll break your neck." Most people do not threaten their partners, but a batterer will try to excuse threats by insisting that everyone talks that way.

**** (16) Breaking or Striking Objects:** This behavior is used as punishment (breaking loved possessions), but is mostly used to terrorize the partner into submission. The abuser may beat on the table with his/her fists, throw objects around or near the partner. Again, this is very remarkable behavior—not only is this a sign of extreme immaturity, but there is great danger when someone thinks they have the "right" to punish or frighten their partner.

**** (17) Any Force During An Argument:** This may involve a batterer holding the partner down, physically restraining the partner from leaving the room, any pushing or shoving. The abuser may hold the partner against the wall and say, "You're going to listen to me!"

******These are often the signs of beginning physical abuse.

Two questions emerged earlier in this paper. The most important is that of why batterers abuse their partners. The second concerns why partners stay. It would be too simplistic to say that batterers abuse their partners because they can, but in heterosexual battering situations, the permission to batter is given by society and often by religious institutions. Consider the following quote from Friar Cherubino of Siena in the 15th Century:

"Scold your wife sharply, bully and terrify her. If this does not work, take up a stick and beat her soundly, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body. . . Then readily beat her, not in rage but out of charity and concern for her soul so that the beating will redound to your merit and her good." (Okun 1986).

The society in which we live is hierarchal and patriarchal, and while some improvements have occurred, the status of women and children remains below that of males. Any situation in which someone can be perceived as "less than" is a potentially abusive, even violent situation. Our own Christian heritage supports the hierarchal and patriarchal model, and much violence and abuse has been perpetrated against women and children because the church condoned it, or at best ignored it.

Thus, the framework exists in our society which supports battering. So why do individuals batter? It is often easier to define what does not cause the violence. Battering is not caused by alcohol and/or other drug abuse, even though abuse behavior may be more common when the abuser is under the influence. Claiming alcohol and/or other drug abuse as the cause allows the batterer to escape responsibility. Abusers are often sober when they act out. The underlying cause of battering is always there--alcohol and/or other drug abuse may exacerbate it. Neither does stress cause battering. Stress is not the cause of power and control issues, even though some batterers may escalate physical violence while under stress. Many have low tolerance for stressful situations, but this is not the cause of the violence. Battering is also not caused by mental illness, although some people with mental illness do act out violently. Most batterers test within normal ranges on psychological scales (Hodges 1993).

Batterers have a need -- and feel a right -- to have power and control over others. They have poor self-esteem and often feel like their own lives are out of control. By controlling others, they feel that their lives are more manageable. Most batterers are

violent only toward their intimates (partners and children), and rarely exhibit this behavior in public. Often when the battering behavior becomes public knowledge, those who know the batterer at work or in social situations are amazed, and may not even believe that such a nice person could do such things to someone else.

So why do victims -- mostly women -- stay in these relationships? Contrary to popular myth, it isn't because they enjoy being abused. Victims stay in battering situations for a number of reasons, the most common being that there does not appear to be any alternative. Barriers to leaving include fear, children, economics, religious beliefs and poor self esteem (Hodges 1993). Of these, fear can often be the biggest obstacle to overcome. The batterer has often threatened his/her partner's safety, even threatened to kill her, to turn his rage on the children, etc. The batterer may have stalked her (in person or by telephone or mail) so that the partner feels that there is no place of safety. While it may be difficult for some of us to understand how this could be tolerated, it must be noted that the abuse does not happen overnight, and often builds very slowly. By the time the partner realizes that the living situation is dangerous and/or unhealthy, there is already a great deal of entanglement which makes leaving very difficult.

If the partner has children with the batterer, leaving becomes much more complicated. Options which are open to an individual woman do not exist for a woman with a child or children. The myth that it is better to have two parental figures -- even if one is abusive toward the other -- than to have a single parent home often keeps the victim from making a choice to leave. The threat of having the children taken away by declaring the victim an unfit parent is very real. While these threats may seem to us to be attempts

at control which no sane person would believe, my personal experience in dealing with departments of social services indicates that this threat can be used in a very destructive weapon, particularly if the victim has a mental health issue (and who wouldn't after living this way!) or a substance abuse problem. I have several clients who were reported to the child protective services by abusive partners who claimed to be the real victim in the situation, only to have the custody of the children be given to the batterer!

Economic realities often prevent the victim from leaving an abusive partner, particularly in situations in which the batterer made it difficult for the victim to work outside of the home. Even if the victim is employed, it may be difficult for him/her to leave, and the batterer may cause enough trouble for the victim on the job that she/he is forced to resign or is fired.

Those of us in ministry must recognize that our religious tradition and even scripture can be a barrier to women leaving abusive husbands. Many a well-meaning (hopefully) pastor has counseled a wife to remain with an abusive husband because it is her duty.

All of these barriers create an atmosphere in which the victim develops a very poor self-esteem. This poor self concept makes it extremely difficult for her/him to believe that there are viable options and alternatives to remaining in the relationship.

Domestic Violence in Same-Sex Relationships

The Mid-Peninsula Support Network for Battered Women in Mountain View, California has developed information specific to lesbian battering (see Appendix A). Dealing with lesbian battering can be extremely difficult for several reasons. First, domestic violence laws do not cover same-sex partners, thus many of the legal protections

(such as restraining orders) are not available. Second, many domestic violence organizations do not offer services to lesbians, much less gay men who have been battered by their partners. And third, battering is a well-kept secret in the lesbian community. Believing that violence is perpetrated by men upon women, the lesbian community often refuses to acknowledge that members of their community could be perpetrating violence upon one another (White, 1994). And if there is a stigma against acknowledging the existence of lesbian battering, there is an even greater stigma against gay males who attempt to report violence perpetrated by their lovers (Snow, 1992). Same sex batterers also have an additional weapon—they may threaten to disclose the partner's sexual orientation to family, employers, etc. This can be especially tragic in situations where child custody is an issue. Beyond these few peculiarities, same-sex battering should be approached much as heterosexual battering.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Reverend Allison Best-Teague, who heads the Peace in the Home Project for the Billy Graham Women and Children's Center (see Appendix B), developed a six-point objectives plan for the project. I believe that this objectives list can be used as an ethical framework for the manner in which we should approach the issue of domestic violence. These objectives are, and our ethical considerations should be: (1) Awareness; (2) Theology; (3) Victim Interaction; (4) Perpetrator Interaction; (5) Community Resources; and (6) Action Plan.

Awareness: It is extremely important that we develop a heightened sense of awareness of this problem. To this end, we can read books, attend workshops and

training sessions, and learn all that we can about this topic. Reverend Best-Teague suggests that this knowledge include a working knowledge of the Power and Control Wheel (see Appendix C), which can be used both to identify abuse and to help victims set goals for healthy relationships. This wheel was developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project of Duluth, Minnesota, which is the recognized national leader in domestic violence prevention projects. Adaptations of this wheel include the Equality Wheel, the Native American Mending the Sacred Hoop Wheel, the Child Abuse Wheel and the Nurturing Children Wheel (see Appendices D- G).

A review of the Equality Wheel provides us with a solid model for ethical relationships. The eight dimensions can provide a framework for holy union counseling. The only ethical relationship is a relationship of equality.

Theology: It is imperative that we consider our theology and its impact upon those who are involved in domestic/family violence, be they victims, batterers, children or others. There are many significant theological issues which relate to family violence. These include, but are not limited to: issues of hierarchy in the family; the marriage covenant; repentance; forgiveness; suffering; the image of God; evil as punishment for sin; and worship. It is imperative that we search our hearts and minds for our own perspectives on these issues, and it is truly unethical for us to attempt to help others deal with these issues if we have not ourselves dealt with them. My own unresolved issues concerning victimization will naturally affect how I deal with others who have such issues, and while it is unrealistic to expect that any helper can completely deal with his/her own issues before helping others, it is imperative that we at least recognize that we have these issues

and that we be in the process of dealing with them -- knowing that often this will be a lifelong process. What do I really believe about repentance and forgiveness? Can I ethically (and realistically) expect a victim to forgive his/her abuser? There are religious counselors who would insist that this take place before any true healing can occur. But does the victim have to forgive someone who is unrepentant? How do I counsel someone who believes that his/her victimization is the direct result of God's punishment for previous sins committed? What do I believe about suffering? How do I counsel someone whose other spiritual advisors have advised her to stay in a dangerous relationship? How do I counter this advise in a professionally ethical way?

Thus, it is extremely important that we seriously consider our own theology and how these very important theological issues impact upon our response to victims of family violence. Only when we have an understanding of our own theology can we begin to help others with their theologies.

Victim Interaction: It is unethical for us to refrain from addressing the issue of family violence, and ignorance is no excuse for doing so. We must learn to recognize the signs of family violence (many of which have been indicated in this paper). We must also learn about safety issues, confidentiality and mandatory reporting, and how to deal with survivors of violence. We must also learn what not to do, such as offer couples counseling. We must be assertive in confronting violence, even in the face of denial on the part of the suspected victim. But we must be careful in how we respond, in order not to increase the danger factor for the victim.

We must be prepared not only to deal with theological issues which the victim might

present, but also with practical issues. Where can she/he go if she/he decides to leave? How can the victim support him/herself? Where can she/he be safe? How can medical help be obtained? All of these are very practical issues which we may not address, but we need to know what the local resources are which can address these issues.

It is our ethical duty to help the victim to come to an understanding of his/her own ethical mandates. Each of us owes it to ourselves to be as healthy (mentally, spiritually and physically) as possible, and we owe it to ourselves to reduce our risk of victimization. While the victim is never responsible for his/her abuse, it is important to help him/her to understand ways in which she/he continues to contribute to the perpetuation of abuse. Where children are involved, it is important to help the custodial partner (who is usually the victim) to understand the impact that the abuse has on the children. Is it ethical for her to continue to live in a situation which is harmful to her children?

Perpetrator Interaction: This may be very difficult for us. We find it much easier to come to the defense of a victim than we do to come to the aid of a perpetrator. Yet God expects us to pray for our enemies. I will admit that it is not easy for me to interact in a kind, even professional way with the men who abuse the women with whom I work. But we have as much of a responsibility to them as we do to the victim. As with the victim, it is unethical for us to ignore the perpetrator. To this end, we must become aware of perpetrator profiles such as those contained in this paper. We must be willing to help the perpetrator accept responsibility and to be held accountable, and we must emphasize the importance of treatment. We must also be willing to emphasize the importance of separating the abuser and his/her partner—there can be no completely safe treatment until

this is accomplished.

We can easily consider all of the theological issues with which we may want to help the abuser, but we also must be ready to offer practical aid to him/her as well. Would we be as willing to offer a temporary residence to the abuser as we would to his/her partner, should they decide to separate? God calls us to minister equally to them.

As in dealing with the victim, it is important to help the victimizer understand ethical issues involved in perpetrating violence. Issues of power and control are at the very center of the abuser's ethics, and his/her ethical framework contains elements which render abuse and violence appropriate. It is imperative that this framework be changed.

Community Resources: It is imperative that we learn about community resources which exist to help victims of domestic violence. If none exist, or if they are limited, perhaps God is calling us to do something about this lack of resources, and to be catalyst in the development of such resources. We must know how services can be accessed, and about eligibility requirements. Those of us in the GLBT community must also be prepared to advocate for the inclusion of our community in these eligibility standards. Some domestic violence shelters do house lesbians who are victims of battering partners, although no state laws cover same-sex relationships. Other laws may apply, however, and we can do much to learn about how to help victims file charges, support them through the court process, and in general be an advocate.

We must also consider ways in which our congregations can minister to those involved in family violence. They can increase their awareness, minister to individuals, provide support to shelters, volunteer for crisis lines and lobby for changes in the legal

system.

Action Plan: Marie Fortune has prepared a workbook which is a workshop curriculum for clergy and other helpers who want to deal more proactively with the issue of violence in the family. The Episcopal Church has developed a handbook for those in ministry who deal with violence and sexual abuse, "Breaking the Silence of Violence" (see Appendix H). Our plan of action should include not only responding to the violence once it has taken place, but should include proactive measures which seek to stop the violence before it occurs. The higher the level of awareness, the greater the level of advocacy. And the greater the levels of both awareness and advocacy, the less likely the environment will be to support violence.

CONCLUSION

The issue of family violence is a complicated one. All pastors will face this issue at one time or another in their congregations. This, like other important issues, should be considered long before we have to deal with a particular situation. Ignorance will not only prevent us from helping, but can actually cause us to do harm. We must also be aware of how our own history and experiences color the manner in which we deal with family or domestic violence. Our only ethical stance is to become as knowledgeable as possible, to continue to deal with our own issues concerning family violence, and to remember that we are to minister to all involved – not just to the victim. An ethical response is a proactive response. We do not wait until the need arises. We must be proactive, and we must be advocates against violence in our society. We must continue to advocate against the roots of power and control issues which create an environment which easily breeds violence.

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